

POLITICAL FEATURE 1-0406  
JOSEPH SULLIVAN/TORONTO

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SOUTH ASIA: POLITICAL ECONOMY OF POVERTY

ANNCR: IT'S ESTIMATED THAT SOME THREE HUNDRED MILLION PEOPLE IN SOUTH ASIA LIVE IN ABSOLUTE POVERTY. THE DYNAMICS OF POVERTY IN THAT PART OF THE WORLD WAS THE SUBJECT OF DISCUSSION FRIDAY (MARCH 19) AT THE ANNUAL MEETING OF THE ASSOCIATION OF ASIAN STUDIES, BEING HELD IN THE CANADIAN CITY OF TORONTO. VOA'S JOSEPH SULLIVAN IS THERE AND SENDS THIS REPORT.

VOICE: THE DIMENSIONS OF THE PROBLEM ARE APPARENT IN THE FACT THAT THE NUMBER OF PEOPLE IN SOUTH ASIA SAID TO BE LIVING IN POVERTY CONSTITUTE NO LESS THAN FORTY PERCENT OF THE POPULATION OF THE AREA. OVER THE YEARS. VARIOUS GOVERNMENTS IN SOUTH ASIA HAVE ADOPTED POVERTY ALLEVIATION AS AN IMPORTANT CLAIM TO LEGITIMACY. SOME HAVE USED IT AS A REASON FOR SUSPENDING OR REWRITING THEIR NATIONAL CONSTITUTIONS. AND, INDEED, POVERTY COULD WELL HAVE A PROFOUND IMPACT ON THE POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC FUTURE OF SOUTH ASIA AS A WHOLE.

WORLD BANK ECONOMIST SHAHID JAVED BURKI, WHO CHAIRED THE PANEL, SAYS THERE ARE THREE CHARACTERISTICS OF POVERTY IN SOUTH ASIA DISTINGUISHING IT FROM POVERTY IN OTHER WORLD REGIONS. THEY ARE, HE OBSERVES, THE PREDOMINANTLY RURAL CHARACTER OF POVERTY IN SOUTH ASIA, AS WELL AS ITS GEOGRAPHICAL CONCENTRATION AND ITS CONTINUITY. MORE THAN EIGHTY-FIVE PERCENT OF SOUTH ASIA'S POOR, HE SAYS, LIVE IN RURAL AREAS.

ACCORDING TO MISTER BURKI, FOR THE MOST PART, POVERTY IN SOUTH ASIA IS NOT A MATTER OF NOT HAVING LAND OR ACCESS TO LAND. OF THE FORTY MILLION RURAL HOUSEHOLDS LIVING IN ABSOLUTE POVERTY ON THE ASIAN SUBCONTINENT, HE SAYS, TWENTY-SEVEN MILLION -- OR SEVENTY-FIVE PERCENT-- EITHER OWN THEIR LAND OR PARTAKE

IN SHARE-CROPPING ARRANGEMENTS. THE REAL PROBLEM, HE BELIEVES, IS ONE OF INCOME DISTRIBUTION.

AS FOR GOVERNMENT EFFORTS TO ALLEVIATE POVERTY, MISTER BURKI CONTENDS THAT THERE HAS BEEN TOO MUCH EMPHASIS ON POPULATION CONTROL AT THE EXPENSE OF OTHER PROGRAMS. THE MOST POWERFUL WAY TO BREAK INTO THE POVERTY-POPULATION CYCLE IN SOUTH ASIA, HE SAYS, IS TO PROVIDE FREE FOOD TO THE VERY POOR, AS HAS BEEN DONE ON A LIMITED BASIS IN SRI LANKA.

(OPT) HE NOTES THAT THE "GREEN REVOLUTION" IN PAKISTAN IN THE MID-1960S PRODUCED REMARKABLE RESULTS. GRAIN OUTPUT, MISTER BURKI NOTES, ROSE FROM SEVEN MILLION TONS IN THE SIXTIES TO ELEVEN MILLION TONS IN THE EARLY 1970'S -- OR AN ANNUAL INCREASE OF FIVE POINT SEVEN PERCENT ABOVE POPULATION. GROWTH. STILL, HE SAYS, THERE IS NO EVIDENCE THAT THE NUTRITION LEVEL OF THE VERY POOR IN PAKISTAN HAS RISEN. (END OPT)

THE WORLD BANK ECONOMIST BELIEVES THAT THE CURRENT STATE OF POLITICAL AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENTS IN THE COUNTRIES OF SOUTH ASIA PRECLUDE A MASSIVE ASSAULT ON POVERTY. THE BASIC DILEMMA FACED BY THESE GOVERNMENTS, HE SAYS, IS THAT WHILE THEY UNDERSTAND THE DYNAMICS OF POVERTY AND HAVE IN THEIR ARSENAL PROGRAMS WHICH CAN GO A LONG WAY TO ALLEVIATING POVERTY, THEY DO NOT YET HAVE THE CRITICAL SUPPORT AND THE WILL TO IMPLEMENT THESE PROGRAMS.

ANOTHER MEMBER OF THE PANEL-- PROFESSOR GUSTAV PAPANEK OF BOSTON UNIVERSITY-- TAKES EXCEPTION WITH THE CLAIM THAT SOUTH ASIAN GOVERNMENTS, LARGELY BECAUSE OF POLITICAL REASONS, HAVE DONE LITTLE OR NOTHING TO ELIMINATE POVERTY. BOTH SRI LANKA AND INDIA, HE SAYS, HAVE TAKEN STEPS INVOLVING SUBSTANTIAL RESOURCES WHICH HAVE BENEFITED THEIR POOREST CLASSES. ONE REASON FOR INCOME DISPARITY, HE OBSERVES, IS DIFFERENCES IN

EDUCATION. AND IN THIS REGARD, INDIA, HE SAYS, HAS GONE TO GREAT LENGTHS TO PROVIDE WIDER ACCESS TO EDUCATION. THE NUMBER OF INDIAN CHILDREN OF SCHOOL AGE IN SCHOOLS, HE NOTES, DOUBLED IN THE NINETEEN SIXTIES.

(OPT) OTHER MEASURES, HE ADDS, HAVE BEEN TAKEN BY GOVERNMENTS IN THE AREA WHICH ARE MORE DIFFICULT TO APPRAISE. TO A DEGREE, PROFESSOR PAPANEK SAYS, THE REALLY POOR IN SOUTH ASIA HAVE BENEFITED FROM ECONOMIC GROWTH EVEN IF THIS HAS OCCURRED IN SOCIETIES WHERE THERE HAS BEEN NO OVER COMMITMENT TO A MORE EQUITABLE DISTRIBUTION OF INCOME. RAPID GROWTH OF AGRICULTURAL OUTPUT AND INDUSTRIAL OUTPUT, HE NOTES, TEND TO MEAN HIGHER PRICES AND VERY OFTEN RESULT IN HIGHER REAL RISE IN WAGES. ECONOMIC GROWTH, HE ADDS, ALSO CREATES MORE JOBS, INCLUDING THOSE FOR ONLY THE CASUALLY EMPLOYED. (END OPT)

PROFESSOR PAPANEK BELIEVES THE GOVERNMENTS OF SOUTH ASIA MAY BE ABLE TO DEAL WITH MASS POVERTY BY TWO ALTERNATIVE STRATEGIES-- THE STRATEGY OF EXTREMELY RAPID ECONOMIC GROWTH OR A STRATEGY OF RADICAL REDISTRIBUTION OF INCOME. BUT, HE CONCLUDES: "WE REALLY DON'T HAVE ANY CASE IN SOUTH ASIA WHICH DEMONSTRATES WHICH OF THOSE STRATEGIES ARE VIABLE."

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